

Title: An Ethnographic Study of Normativity and Deviance through an Examination of Ritual and Taboo in Lolita Culture

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Introduction: Elegant Gothic Lolita, or simply lolita, is a fashion subculture that began as a street fashion among the youth in Harajuku Japan. Lolita fashion is characterized by the modest and Victorian era inspired clothing that often features knee length skirts and dresses that are supported by petticoats, blouses with ruffles and pintucks, and legs covered by either stockings or socks. The lolita fashion subculture has also traveled to outside of Japan and to Europe, South America, the Middle East, Australia, and North America, where numerous communities have formed.

Purpose: The purpose of this ongoing project is to explore the rituals, taboos, and what is considered “deviant” in the Western Lolita Community, especially in the realms of behavior, dress, and sexuality. As with many cultures, there are a set of punishments and rewards for following or failing to follow the protocols that are set in place. I explore what these rules, behavioral protocols, rites of passage, and dress codes are, while also examining the punishment and reward systems that are in place.

Methods: Participant observation, interviews, and auto-ethnography have been used. Participant observation will take place in two parts. I will participate in and observe lolita meetups and events that will take place offline and in person, and will also take place in an online sphere through popular anonymous online messaging forums. I will also conduct interviews with various members of each lolita community that I engage with. Each interview will focus on the participant’s experiences with lolita, what they consider the rules of the fashion and the community to be, etc.

Results: The Lolita fashion subculture is complex and hierarchical. An emphasis is not just placed on the clothing involved in the subculture, but also on the personalities and merits of each individual member and how they interact with the community as a whole.

Discussion/Conclusion: This is an ongoing project that will be completed in April for an honors thesis of the same title.